

SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR COLLECTING AND TRANSMITTING MEDICAL DATA

RELATED APPLICATION INFORMATION

[0001] This application is a divisional of U.S. Patent Application Serial Number 09/724,721, filed on November 28, 2000, which is based on U.S. Provisional Patent Application Serial Number 60/168,942, filed on December 3, 1999.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] The invention relates to systems for collecting and transmitting medical and health-related data over a network.

[0003] The healthcare industry is the largest sector of this nation's economy, comprising over one trillion dollars, or roughly 13% of the gross domestic product (GDP). Because of increasing healthcare costs, it is desirable to reduce overhead, free hospitals beds, and increase compliance with treatment. Remote medical data monitoring devices are directed precisely at those goals.

[0004] Accordingly, advances in healthcare and medical devices are increasingly required to meets the needs of an aging population. For example, medical industry experts predict that the demand for medical data monitoring systems will drastically increase over the next decade. Existing monitoring systems, however, fall short of satisfying customers' needs in several ways.

[0005] Some remote monitoring systems have been designed to allow patients to transmit their medical data from their homes. An example of one such monitoring system provides a measuring device, such as a blood sugar monitor, which a patient uses to measure a physiological attribute. The patient then enters the measurements taken by the device into the monitoring system, which transmits the data over phone lines or the Internet. Obvious drawbacks of this system are reliability of data and ease of use. Due to human error, users will sometimes enter incorrect data. Because it is not connected to the measuring device, the monitoring system is incapable of detecting or correcting the error, and the database is therefore corrupted. Further, it is inconvenient, and perhaps difficult for some users, to manually enter data. Other existing devices are inadequate because they are not

easily expanded, cannot work with multiple users or devices, or are encumbered by physical wire connections.

SUMMARY OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

[0006] Accordingly, a system for collecting and transmitting medical and health-related data over a network is provided. In one preferred embodiment, the system comprises a measuring device that measures a physiological attribute and produces a first signal related thereto, an integration system coupled to the measuring device that receives the first signal from the measuring device and converts it into a second signal for transmitting over the Internet, a communications system that transmits the second signal over the Internet, and a remote system that receives the second signal. In accordance with one aspect of the preferred embodiment, the integration system is adapted to read the first signal as it is sent from the measuring device to its display. In accordance with one aspect of the preferred embodiment, the remote system extracts the measured physiological attribute from the second signal and populates a database with that data. In accordance with another aspect of the preferred embodiment, a web-based portal is provided for accessing the database over the Internet.

[0007] In another preferred embodiment, a method is disclosed for collecting and transmitting medical and health-related data over a network. The method includes the steps of collecting the data by sensing an electrical signal from a measuring device, converting the electrical signal for transmitting over the network, and transmitting the data to a remote system.

[0008] In another preferred embodiment, several measuring devices are adapted to measure physiological attributes and produce corresponding signals relating thereto, an integration system receives the signals and converts them into a format that a communications system transmits over the network, and a remote system coupled to the network receives the data. In accordance with one aspect of the preferred embodiment, the signals include unique user identifiers that associate each datum with an individual user, thereby allowing the system to maintain data for multiple users and multiple devices.

[0009] Other aspects and features of the present invention will become apparent from consideration of the following description taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0010] FIG. 1 is a block diagram of the system according to a preferred embodiment.

[0011] FIGS. 2a-c are block diagrams of interfaces between the measurement device and the integration system according to corresponding preferred embodiments.

[0012] FIG. 3 is a block diagram of the system according to another preferred embodiment.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

[0013] A system for collecting and transmitting data over a network is herein described. In particular, the system is described as applied to the collection and transmission of medical data from one or more measuring devices; however, it will become apparent to persons skilled in the art that the teachings of this disclosure can be applied to other fields.

[0014] Referring to FIG. 1, a block diagram is provided showing the fundamental aspects of the system. In accordance with a preferred embodiment of the system, a measuring device, integration system, communications system, and remote system are provided. The measuring device measures a predetermined datum or data, which the integration system then acquires and formats for the communication system. The communications system provides an interface for transmitting the data across a network — e.g., the Internet — to the remote system, which then records the data for subsequent processing.

[0015] The measuring device may be any type of device that takes at least one measurement and converts it into one or more electrical signals. Preferably, the measuring device comprises a microprocessor that sends the electrical signals to a digital display, which then displays the measurement. A variety of existing medical devices can act as the measuring device in conjunction with this system, including weight scales, body fat measuring devices, blood glucose monitors, coumadin monitors, blood pressure monitors, heart rate monitors, and various fitness equipment.

[0016] The integration system is specifically adapted to acquire the measurement from the particular measuring device. As the types of measuring devices that may be used with this system vary, so do the possible techniques for acquiring data from the devices. One method of capturing data from the measuring devices is illustrated in FIG. 2a, in which the measuring device comprises a

processor and a digital display. The processor and display are electrically coupled by a plurality of lines, the number of lines being dictated by the design of the measuring device. In the embodiment shown in FIG. 2a, the integration system is connected to the measuring device in parallel with the microprocessor and display. The integrated system can thus “tap” into the measuring device — either from the output pins or socket of the processor, the input pins or socket of the display, or anywhere along the cable or traces between the processor and display. The integration system is preferably designed so that, when connected in parallel to the measuring device as described, it does not degrade the electrical signal and cause the display to read an incorrect value.

[0017] Alternatively, the integration system can be electrically coupled to the measuring device in series with the processor and display, as diagramed in FIG. 2b. In this embodiment, the integration system is adapted to receive the electrical signals directly from the processor. The integration system is further adapted to supply the electrical signals to the display of the measuring device. In accordance with yet another embodiment, shown in FIG. 2c, the display of the measuring device and the integration system are each connected directly to the processor. This method is suitable for measuring devices that include an extra port from which the data is accessible. In this embodiment, the electrical signals sent from the processor to the display may be different from those sent to the integration system.

[0018] Typically, the electrical signals tapped by the integration system as described above are multiplexed signals sent to a digital display, such as an LCD or LED display. Depending on the design of the measuring device and its display, the integration system includes hardware and/or software for determining the data from the plurality of electrical signals using techniques known in the art. For example, the integration system may include a network of logic gates for decoding and demultiplexing the signals from the digital display of the measuring device. Alternatively, the integration system can include a microprocessor programmed to decode the data from the signals. It can be appreciated that the integration system must be specifically designed for each type of measuring device because the formats of the signals will vary from device to device, and thus the algorithm for retrieving the data from the signals will likewise vary. The system is therefore highly adaptable and modular, as almost any type of electrical device can be thus tapped for its data.

[0019] Using the above techniques, the integration system can be adapted to acquire measurements from an existing OEM measuring device. In such a case, little or no modification of the OEM device's processor would be required; therefore, it is relatively easy to provide additional functionality for the system by adding different types of measuring devices. In the case of medical devices, that little or no modification of the device is required avoids certain FDA requirements for new devices, allowing the system to enter the marketplace faster. The integration system could also be designed in conjunction with a new measuring device, in which case it would be possible to provide the measuring device and integration system in one package.

[0020] In accordance with an aspect of a preferred embodiment, the integration system may also include a display for displaying the measurement that it acquired from the measuring device.

[0021] The integration system further adds data to the measurement that it retrieves from the measuring device. The integration system appends to the measurement a unique device identifier (ID). The device ID is preferably an integer, for example a six-digit number. The device ID is unique to each measuring device, and in some cases it may be read directly from the measuring device. In systems where several users share a measuring device, the integration system preferably further adds a unique user ID to the measurement and device ID, since a device ID alone would not be sufficient to associate the measurement with a particular user. The integration system may retrieve the user ID from the measuring device if available therefrom, or the user ID may be inputted directly into the integration system by the user via a programmable card swipe, keyed input, or any other means known in the art.

[0022] The integration system formats the measurement, device ID, and user ID for transmission to the communications system, to which the integration system is communicatively coupled. In accordance with a preferred embodiment, the integration system formats the measurement, device ID, and user ID as a text string. Alternatively, this data could be encoded using a standard or a proprietary algorithm. The integration system or the communications system may also add a time and date stamp to the data to indicate when the measurement was taken.

[0023] Although the integration and communication systems can be distinct systems, they may be implemented as a single unit using shared hardware and software. Further, this unit may be integral with the measuring device, as mentioned above.

[0024] The communication system formats the data received from the integration system for transmission over a network to the remote system. In a preferred embodiment, the data are sent over the Internet to the remote system. The data can be formatted in any of a variety of appropriate formats known in the art. If sent over the Internet, the data may be put into any of the established Internet communications protocols. For example, a text string containing the data could be inserted into the subject line or body of an Internet email, which would then be sent to a desired email address. Alternatively, the data could be put into a markup language such as HTML or XML, be inserted into a file sent over the network, or sent via a secure protocol such as SHTTP or SSL.

[0025] The communications system sends the formatted data to a remote system, which is also communicatively coupled to the network. In accordance with an aspect of a preferred embodiment, the remote system is programmed to determine the identity of the user to whom the measurement applies using only the device ID and/or user ID provided in the transmission. Therefore, it is unnecessary for information of a personal nature to be sent over the network. This is highly desirable in the context of, e.g., medical related data, as such information tends to be of a personal nature. While secure protocols and encryption techniques known in the art may be added to the system, the absence of personal information in the transmission obviates the need for these additional security techniques.

[0026] The communications system can be communicatively coupled to the network using a variety of methods well known in the art. Preferably, the connection to the network is effected without physical connections. Wireless communication makes the system more expandable for adding measuring devices and the like without the extra confusion of physical connections. For example, commercially available two-way pager communication systems may be used to provide the network connection interface. These commercially available systems are easily modified to interface with the integration system and may also be advantageously located within the housing of the device. The communications system may alternatively transmit the data using, e.g., Bluetooth technology or through the transmission bands of cellular phones that do not normally carry voice data. Many other techniques known in the art may also be used to transmit the data. For example, the communications system may be coupled to a computer having a communications link with the network, through, e.g., an ISDN line, cable modem, or DSL. Alternatively, the communications system may be linked to the

network via a modem and phone connection. It is apparent that any of the known techniques for transmitting the data as described herein may be employed without departing from the inventive concepts of this disclosure.

[0027] Preferably, a data verification algorithm is performed to validate the integrity of the data packets as they are sent from the communications system to the remote system. One widely used technique is the Cyclic Redundancy Check (CRC). In the CRC, a number is calculated from the contents of a packet using a standard algorithm, and that number is then appended to the packet in a final field. After the packet is transmitted, the algorithm is performed on the received packet, and the numerical result is compared to the contents of the CRC field. If the calculated result is not equal to the value of the CRC field, the packet is discarded because the packet received is not identical to the packet sent. The CRC is preferred because it is a very powerful and easily implemented technique for ensuring data reliability; however, it should be understood that any known data checking technique can be used with the present system, and CRC is described by way of example.

[0028] The remote system is adapted to receive and decode the data transmitted from the communications system over the network. For example, in the case where the data is sent as a text string in the subject line of an Internet email, the remote system would first extract the string. The remote system would then parse the string to retrieve the data, which would then be placed in an appropriate database for receiving such information. The remote system could also add a time and date stamp to the data to indicate when it was received by the remote system and stored in the database. Preferably, the remote system sends a confirmation message to the communications system that indicates whether the data was received or whether it needs to be resent.

[0029] Once the measurement data collected by the remote system is inserted into one or more databases, the remote system may then provide a portal for accessing the data. In accordance with one embodiment, a computer system provides a web-based portal for viewing the data in a secure manner. To optimize performance, the portal might employ a secondary database keyed to individual users. The user or other authorized person could log into the portal using a web browser from any computer in the world connected to the Internet. By entering a user name and password, the person could access the data and any other functionality that the portal provides.

Advantageously, the portal could include advertisements, and these advertisements could be highly targeted because the content of the information being accessed is known.

[0030] Referring to an example in which the data is medical related, a patient would be able to access his or her medical profile from any web browser. This medical profile would include the data measured by the medical measuring device. The profile could also be made accessible to the patient's physician, other medical personnel, and perhaps the patient's insurance company. The profile could also be tailored and formatted for which party accesses the information, as it may be desirable to limit some information provided to third parties. The patient's medical profile could be useful, e.g., in determining the patient's compliance with a prescribed medical regimen.

[0031] In one exemplary embodiment, the system is adapted to provide patients with fertility counseling. The measuring device is a fertility thermometer, and individual patients would take readings from the thermometer at regular intervals. After sufficient data is acquired by the remote system, a patient could access the portal to view her medical profile, which might include, e.g., a graph of the temperature readings over the fertility cycle. The portal might also provide the patient with counseling, such as a time period of greatest fertility during the cycle.

[0032] As explained, the system can be adapted to accommodate several measuring devices, which may be desired when a user has several physical attributes to be monitored. Also, a plurality of measuring devices serving several users would be desired in a system for monitoring the fitness progress of members of a health club. In such a system, one or more of the measuring devices would be fitness machines. The system could be adapted to provide club members with access to their individual fitness profiles using a terminal at the club or, perhaps, from their homes via the Internet.

[0033] FIG. 3 illustrates how such a system can be configured. According to a preferred embodiment, a plurality of measuring devices are provided. Each measuring device is connected to an integration system, which is adapted to extract data from the associated measuring device as explained above with reference to FIG. 1. After a measurement is taken by a measuring device, the corresponding integration system then adds the unique device and user IDs to the data, formats it, and transmits it to a central communications system. Upon receiving a measurement from an integration system, the communications system transmits the data to the remote system via the network, as described above with reference to FIG. 1.

[0034] While the invention is susceptible to various modifications and alternative forms, specific examples thereof have been shown in the drawings and are herein described in detail. It should be understood, however, that the invention is not to be limited to the particular form disclosed, but to the contrary, the invention is to cover all modifications, equivalents, and alternatives falling within the spirit and scope of the appended claims.